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The (Mis-)Measure of Intellectual Culture

Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline
by Richard A. Posner
Harvard University Press, 2002.

I can remember with great clarity the book that more than any other haunted the years of my adolescence: the French journalist/philosopher Jean-François Revel's *How Democracies Perish* (1983). It was a frightening and foreboding work, whose central thesis—that Western liberal democracies, with their tradition of internal dissent and self-doubt, were probably enjoying the briefest of historical appearances before their eventual fall to Communism—seemed all too plausible to a young man who had come to political consciousness amid the trauma and defeatism of the 1970s. I can still recall driving my old sedan along the byways of suburban Detroit, a copy of Revel's book fading in the back window, thinking, with that peculiar strain of youthful conceit, that I had been let in on a terrible secret, a tortured, penetrating insight into the fall of civilizations.

The worst of Revel's fears, of course, never came to pass. Soviet Communism melted before Western courage and resolve (not to mention Reaganite optimism); the bloodiest century on record, instead of succumbing to the dark night intimated by Revel, unveiled a wholly unexpected surprise. Still, it must be acknowledged that

How Democracies Perish, despite its flaws of prognostication, did play an important part in framing the intellectual arguments against détente (i.e. appeasement); and in its influence on such figures as Jeanne Kirkpatrick it played a role in the ultimate victory of the West.

The story of the reception of Revel's book not only reveals much about those final enigmatic years of the Cold War, it stands as a testament to the frequently complex, unpredictable interplay between ideas, individuals, and history. It also demonstrates the inherent difficulties in any attempt to divine the future impact and importance of a single work. As such, it serves to illuminate the inadequacies of books like Richard Posner's well-meaning *Public Intellectuals*, which, for all its efforts to explain, evaluate, and pass judgment on the current state of public intellectual life in the United States, ultimately fails to appreciate the subtleties and expansiveness of its subject.

Posner is, of course, one of our most

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serious and versatile thinkers. His wide-ranging mind and measured judgment have made for him a well-deserved reputation as a neoconservative *éminence*. As a former professor of law at the University of Chicago (and currently a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals of the Seventh Circuit), Posner has shown an abiding interest in the world of ideas, particularly in the overlap between economics, literature, philosophy, and the law. Yet his personal scholarly interest in the *idea* of the public intellectual (and his impetus for writing this book) is relatively recent, growing out of his profound disappointment in what he saw as the scandalously low quality of the public debate surrounding both the Clinton impeachment scandal, about which he has ably written, and the Microsoft case, which he oversaw for the Justice Department.

In Posner's view, these two events not only set in high relief the worst sins of the modern intellectual—the partisan posturing, the willful inaccuracies, and the sloppy thinking—they symbolize the very decline of the institution of the American public intellectual. For Posner, men like Edmund Wilson, John Dewey, and Lionel Trilling, who once bestrode the cultural landscape like colossi, are now nowhere to be found. Unfortunately, in his zeal to get on with the true focus of his work—a number-crunching analysis of the state of the American public intellectual “market”—Posner offers no evidence, empirical or otherwise, that the *quality* of public intellectual output is appreciably lower today than it was half a century ago. Aside from his passing mention of the stock trio of Dewey, Wilson, and Trilling, he presents no historical perspective on the question. In fact, no meaningful contrast between intellectuals past and present is ever proffered. Posner has no qualms, however, in taking to task Robert Bork, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Robert Putnam for their own declinist assertions,

most specifically with what he sees as their fallacious construction of an implausibly rosy pre-1960s past from which we have fallen. While this may or may not be a valid criticism, it certainly does not release him from his obligation to prove, or at least explain in detail, the “decline” upon which his argument rests.

Perhaps Posner believes that no real proof is necessary; indeed, few (on either the Left or the Right) would disagree that we live in an era of impoverished intellectual discourse. But while there may be few giants now among us, one has only to consult works like Robert Conquest's *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (2001) or Hilton Kramer's *Twilight of the Intellectuals: Culture and Politics in the Era of the Cold War* (1999) to recall how woolly-headed and even criminal were so many intellectual lights of bygone decades. To be sure, many of today's intellectuals remain firmly in the thrall of contemporary gender and racial politics, yet few—thank God—seem as positively disposed toward, or even interested in (as they once were), the politics and projects of the great Communist butchers of the previous century. Where, one might ask, have all the Maoists gone?

Posner's central mistake, however, is his attempt to analyze the world of the public intellectuals as a market, as a basic interplay between supply and demand. To this end, he has amassed lists of intellectuals that go on for pages, breaking thinkers down into numerous categories (male, female, living, dead, black, white, academic, non-academic, Jewish, non-Jewish, etc.). One particularly long list ranks them according to the number of mentions they receive on the internet. There are graphs and charts, coefficients, t-statistics, and independent variables. Yet what conclusions are to be drawn from this mess of confusing data—and how it all furthers

Posner's argument—is unclear; it should have been left it out.

Such data certainly does nothing to support Posner's further claim that the "decline" of the public intellectual in America is the result of an "inefficient market," i.e. a market that fails to produce what the public demands. The main problem, as he sees it, is a lack of accountability. In his view, contemporary intellectuals—an increasing number of whom are over-specialized and politically polarized academics—have little incentive (or ability) to provide responsible, cogent commentary when they leave their ivory towers for the public spotlight. Opining on subjects outside their areas of expertise, they are rarely held to any recognizable standards and are therefore freed to indulge their personal or political prejudices—as well as make predictions that suffer a demonstrably high "failure rate." Admittedly, this accountability problem may help to explain many sub-par performances, but Posner's suggestions for reform—encouraging universities to post their faculty's public intellectual work on web pages, asking individuals to disclose their income from public intellectual work, insisting that books not be reviewed by those criticized within—are remarkable in their tepidness and have little chance of bringing about real change. (Posner admits as much.) They surely will do nothing to discourage people from making predictions about the future. And why would we

want to discourage them? The George Orwells, Aldous Huxleys, and Jean-François Revels have always known that while predictions (like so much speculative thought) may suffer from a "high failure rate," they may also uncover serious and altogether unforeseen truths.

In the end, it is hard to disagree with Posner's basic indictment of the academy for much of the follies and errors of American intellectual life. Granted, in the post-Cold War era, our universities may seem less like bastions of subversion than the repositories of the banal and the ludicrous. Still, this lack of profundity has its costs—to both students and society. But no system of constraints on behavior or social-scientific analysis can offer any real hope for amelioration, for the problems themselves are not external in nature. The true measure of any intellectual culture lies not in its dynamism or technical virtuosity but in the soundness and moral temper of the ideas which undergird it. Any tangible improvement in such a culture can only come from two sources: from those welcome, yet rare, paradigm-changing works which reset our ethical compasses—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, etc.—or, on a humbler scale, from the good faith exertions of individuals, who, over the course of their careers, endeavor to infuse their work and their teaching with the full promise of the humanistic ideal.